



Professional Associations Must Address Shifting Landscapes

By Connie Kovolenko

During economic turbulence, corporations are rethinking value and making different tradeoffs that involve money and time. One area is the company's membership expenditures in professional associations.

Association managers know their association's perceived "value" is about to undergo microscopic ROI dissection. So before the annual membership dues are invoiced this year, the challenge becomes how to find ways to instill member confidence.

Baseline research is a must. What are the existing perceptions of the association? Do you have a clear idea of what services members consider valuable? Investing the time and resources into launching an E/EI (Experience divided by Expectation Index) will provide a valid benchmark evaluation of the association's value. This is a proprietary statistic used as part of a scaled, factor analysis. The trade association determines the general factors-- such as member satisfaction measurement, brand identity evaluation, programming, new discount offerings, or any host of other factors.

The Index measures the members' expectations and requirements against the association's performance on those expectations. It is a two-sided evaluation, not one-dimensional rankings of factors. The findings help guide the association to accurately make strategic decisions about: cost reductions; resource redeployment (dollars, time, etc.); value migration to more member relevance or more organizational strength; and repositioning (opportunities to improve). Members are surveyed by email, and the process from design to analysis takes about one month.

If your association is not able to undertake an E/EI Index, then gather member feedback in other ways. Consider a simple on-line survey targeted to evaluate only one or two aspects of the association. Several popular electronic survey tools are simple enough to implement; however, properly wording the questions so as not to influence a response or skew results is critical.

You also can call ten long-standing members and conduct phone interviews based on the same questions. Leave time for open ended questions and feedback. Don't rush the conversation. Alternatively, set up several on-site personal appointments or host a regional breakfast meeting with several compatible members. Consider adding a feedback button or blog to the association website where members can post reaction or comments to a particular question that you display. Conversations with members are critical.

If you have an association event already planned in the near future, splice in a segment of time to talk with participants about the value of their membership. The format of that conversation could be a brief feedback session or specific small focus group on a particular service that the association provides. Ask participants to fill out comment cards or participate in a short problem-solving session.

Also, evaluate how you promote your member benefits. If you are promoting value as “discounts” on products and services, that may or may not be what your members want. This may be an appropriate time to review the fee structure. Could you attract or retain membership if dues fees were altered?

Evaluate where membership fees are being spent, because your members have already done so. Are they being spent on events and services your members think are worthwhile, or are they going for salaries and overhead? Is your association helping its member businesses grow and prosper? Do you even know what members would consider helpful?

Once you’ve gathered your research and spent the time to identify the trends and issues, announce to members changes that are going to be made moving forward. Position your association as capable of making adjustments to new economic realities.

Your goal is to retain members, yet you need to prepare for adjustments. Figure out how to better use channel marketing and electronic communications to deliver your message. Eliminate programs that have shown declining member interest.

Keep communicating with your members. Let them know that you are there to support them during the market transition. Let them know you appreciate their support of the association, and when you do voice that appreciation, do it personally, not in a blast email.

Corporate budget reflection can offer growth opportunities for association management, and that requires associations to research and embrace conversation and listening. Be creative and try a variety of tools. They are all needed, and they all need to work together synergistically. Smart associations survive market decline when they keep focused on hearing from their members, and then acting.

Editors Note:

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